

by C. Benjamin Ford, Staff Writer

Nearly two years after the Red Line crash that killed nine people, one of Metro's sharpest critics said she believes the agency is on the right track toward improving safety.

Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D) of Baltimore called a meeting Wednesday on Capitol Hill with congressional members from Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia and Metro General Manager Richard Sarles to get an update on efforts to correct the flaws in the system that were exposed by a series of deadly incidents.

Eight passengers and a train operator were killed on June 22, 2009, in a Red Line crash of two trains near the Fort Totten Metrorail Station, followed by four other deadly incidents that killed five workers between Aug. 9, 2009, and Jan. 26, 2010.

Mikulski, who had blasted previous Metro top officials, praised Sarles for changing the way the transit system operates.

"The point of today's hearing is to not fingerpoint but to pinpoint what else we need to do in partnership," Mikulski told Sarles.

Metro's system was aging, but the National Transportation Safety Board's investigation showed that important maintenance work and upgrades were put off in the past.

"There was a culture of coverup of the problems, and frankly we didn't do our due diligence," Mikulski said of past problems with Metro.

“What bothered us most was finding there was an absence of a culture of safety,” said Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Md.).

Additional training, new manuals, stricter safety protocols and more inspections by safety officers in the field are making a difference, Sarles said.

“WMATA has made a sea change in regards to safety,” he said.

One morning he showed up at his office to find a dozen track workers eager to ask that a fellow worker not be fired for a safety violation, Sarles said. He explained to them that he would rather discuss the reasons why safety is important to them than to talk to their families at their funeral service, he said.

Near the end of the hearing, Mikulski brought up Sarles’ anecdote about the workers showing up to talk with him.

“It shows there is an open door of communications and they felt comfortable coming to you,” she said, praising Sarles. “They might not have been happy with the outcome, but there was a channel of communication.”

Mikulski said it is up to the congressional delegation of the region to continue to push for funding to make the necessary improvements.

“We need to find a wallet, and we need to stay the course,” she said.

Sarles said that since the last meeting with congressional leaders, Metro had completed more than 100 recommendations from the NTSB and believed that 10 more will be closed out once the NTSB reviews the work.

But Sarles said that without continued federal support, Metro runs the risk of “a slide backwards” because of the high costs involved.

More than \$700 million will be spent to replace outdated subway cars with new ones that provide greater crash safety and to add upgrades to other older cars that need work, Sarles said.

“We’re trying to dig our way out of a hole,” he said.

If there has to be a choice between safety improvements or passengers waiting longer for trains, the customers will have to wait, Sarles said.

Minority Whip Steny H. Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mechanicsville said Metro should set the example for other public transit systems.

“This is a system that has been the pride of America,” Hoyer said.